



Figure 1 (opposite).
Langa Magwa, *New Identity*, 1999.
Goat skin and mixed media
(138 x 94.5 cm). Durban Art
Gallery

Shifting Contexts: Material, Process and Contemporary Art in Times of Change

Nontobeko Ntombela

The epistemology of domination leaves a bitter taste with us . . . but it prompts us to think that there is no purity of resistance. It obliges us not to take closed and ahistorical entities – discrete units – to be political modes of subjectivisation, which invent themselves and experiment with themselves, issuing from upset material condition of existence and imposed dominant semiologies. It forces us to adopt novel viewpoints, and hone worthy concepts for understanding new mythologies . . . if nothing is ever promised to history, everything bears the trace of historicity. — Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, race, classe*

In this essay, I discuss a selection of artworks produced by South African artists in the period 1999–2009: *New Identity* (1999) by Langa Magwa (Figure 1), *Portrait Series* (2001) by Zama Duniwa (Figure 2),¹ *Emabufjo* (2009) by Nandipha Mntambo (Figure 3) and *Umthubi* (2008) by Nicholas Hlobo (pp. 50–51 detail of Figure 4). This period is important for three reasons. Firstly, it encompasses the early years of the new democracy in South Africa. Secondly, it points to a moment of transformation during which young artists, particularly black artists, were beginning to gain critical acclaim in the public domain, both locally and internationally. Thirdly, it signals a turning point for South African artistic trends, as new voices entering the art scene claimed their space.

The work of this period has arisen out of the political and social changes that have taken place in South Africa since the new democratic dispensation in 1994. This is important to understand in relation to the progression and evolution of artistic concerns in this period and the ways in which the selected works speak directly to the manifestation of a complicated history into current contexts.

Through this selection, this essay examines artistic strategies employed in the use of materials – such as goatskin, cowhide, beads and wood, widely regarded as African traditional material – in contemporary art. It looks at how the selected artists use these materials and more importantly, *why* they are drawn to such materials. Arguably, such media might equally be considered universal and I make this point in order to highlight how, in certain spaces, this material is typecast and linked to perceptions about African ritualistic traditions based on Western perspectives – which have historicised the arts of Africa in a particular way, with particular results.² By working with such materials, these artists

¹ The names of the individual works in Zama Duniwa's *Portrait Series* are: *Najiyini Kuwe?* (What am I to you), *Uthini Ngami?* (What are you saying about me) and *Ufanani Kimi?* (What do you want from me).

² I have used the word 'tradition' with the understanding that such material forms part of an ongoing traditional practice, which is both ritualistic and artistic. The use of 'Western perspective' refers to both the global north, as well as local perspectives that have worked with ideas that exercised gatekeeping measures to exclude the work of black artists from being collected in art